

Little Bronze Ghosts

by Whatimleavingbehind

.....The fog rolled in low over the lake like breath from a great sleeping beast, the kind that

hums through bone and memory. Leaves rattled somewhere behind, dry with the season. The

waves were soft and slow like a sweet song. Silas stood knee-deep in the water, bare feet

numbed and balanced on slick pebbles, the cold water swirling gently around his legs.

The beach was nearly empty, scattered with drift and rust-colored leaves. The season had

already turned. Fifty degrees and sinking. He liked it this way. His kind of weather.

The pendant lay against his chest like a kept secret. It wasn't jewelry. It was a memory that

refused to go quiet.

The dragon at the top was coiled like a thought - never fully at rest.

That's when he saw her.

She came from the fog in front of him - barefoot in the water, stepping carefully, as if she too

respected the stones. Her long black hair hung straight and dark, just past the middle of her

back. She wore black jean shorts and a cutoff shirt that had seen real years. A

narrow black belt

hugged her midriff. She didn't seem to feel the cold at all. Her eyes were on him the whole time.

Curiosity. Like she already knew something about him.

Her voice came gently like falling snow, delicate Russian snowflakes landing, and numbing his

head.

....."!That pendant did you make it!?"

His mouth went dry. He was used to silence. But now she was standing no more than four feet

away, water wrapping both their legs like a quiet net.

He nodded. Looked down.

"Is that a dragon !!?"

His hand rose to it. He met her gaze finally. She tilted her head just slightly. He realized she was

taller than him. Much taller.

He nodded again. "Yeah. I made it for myself."

"The stone?" she asked, still watching him.

He didn't answer right away. He ran his thumb over it slowly, the surface still slightly warm from

his body heat.

"Found it deep in the woods, six hours north of where I was living at the time. It's an alkaline rock."

She tilted her head again, those sharp cheekbones catching light beneath the clouded sky.

"Lost wax?" she asked.

He nodded, throat dry from her proximity, her beauty.

She looked back at the pendant and then down at the water. Her focus was effortless, yet keen.

Her eyes swept over the stones, touching them with her gaze. She crouched suddenly, long

fingers dipping just under the surface near his feet. She pulled one up, held it to the light.

"Too soft," she said, tossing it gently back. Her fingers moved with ease. Then she took another.

A darker one.

"This might take polish," she murmured, turning it in her palm. "But too flat."

He watched her as she studied the stones, graceful and sure in the water, a movement that felt

old - like she'd been doing this longer than anyone could guess.

She stood back up. The water slid away from her calves.

"You always wear it?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, voice low. "It's part of me."

She nodded again, eyes locking with his. There was a long pause. The breeze picked up,

brushing her hair into her face. She didn't move it away. Her eyes never left his.

"My name's Rachel," she said softly.

"Silas," he replied.

She held his gaze a second longer, then turned slowly and began walking toward the shore. The

water peeled away from her thighs in soft ripples. As she passed, her voice trailed behind her -

gentle, but certain.

"I come every night to watch the sunset. Maybe I'll see you again."

He stood still as she crossed the stony edge and stepped into the waiting mist, swallowed by it

without hesitation.

The dense Russian forest behind the beach stood silent and black, ancient and unreadable. He

didn't know its paths yet, or how far its silence reached. But the way she moved into it - slow,

unaafraid - had the kind of beauty that hurt. He watched her pick up what looked like a Red

stick that was leaning against a tree, right before she disappeared into the forest.

It had rained that next morning after they first met, and the trees still held the scent of it-pine

and bark, wet stone and moss. The town was small, the kind that didn't change, and didn't want

to. It was quiet in a way cities forget how to be. No one lied here. No one stole. People left their

doors open, because there was nothing worth hiding and no one to hide it from.

Silas spent that day walking around, getting familiar.

He had bought the house just a few months earlier-simple and weathered, tucked into the

forest's edge like it had always waited for someone like him. Deep in the center of Krasnoyarsk

Krai, Siberia, about a dozen miles from the Yenisei River, he chose this region for the endless

forest and rocks along this river, rockhounding and solitude. He paid good

money to find a small

village that didn't appear on any map. The gallery show in Berlin had sold out in two days. Every

piece, gone. They said he was the next genius. One collector said his work would "outlast

nations, speak beyond language, and remain even if memory fades." But that wasn't why he

came here. It wasn't to disappear-it was to arrive.

He had researched every culture in the world-every dance, every ruin, every language he

could translate. But when his best friend died, all sound blurred-except one. Russian music.

There was grief in it, and meaning. It was the only music that could hold his mourning. And it

never let him go.

He sat on a wooden bench just before the sun began to fall through the trees, turning the moss

golden and green like a living fresco. He was watching the light move across the leaves when

he heard footsteps behind him - deliberate but not rushed.

.....Rachel.

She said nothing as she walked up and sat beside him. The bench didn't creak. The forest

made more noise than she did. Her hair was down, same as before. The breeze moved strands

across her face, but her eyes stayed fixed ahead, thoughtful. She wore the same cutoff shirt,

slightly faded, and the same black jean shorts. And a thick leather strap around her waist,

looked like it belonged to a heavy bag, or maybe gear for riding. I didn't think much of it at the

time.

His eyes dropped for a moment to the ground between them. His boots were scuffed, black and

solid. Her feet seemed to glow gently in the dimming light, like something nocturnal and ancient.

He looked back up. Her ears peeked through her hair, set wide and proud, reaching clearly out

from the sides of her head in a way few would dare not to hide. But she didn't hide them. They

framed her face with a boldness that somehow felt delicate, as if honesty itself had taken shape.

They made her unforgettable.

Her face was long and fine, every feature placed with intention by something older than

symmetry. Her smile, when it came, was wide and bright, full of long, even teeth. It was the kind

of smile that could flood a quiet room. It made him want to see it again, even when she wasn't

smiling.

"I live at the edge of town," she said, eyes still forward. "That's my horse farm. I breed only

Yakutian horses. Parents left it to me when they passed. It has the old wood plank house - the

kind that leans even when it stands straight." She glanced down, brushing something off her leg.

"You've probably seen it."

He had. From a distance, through a break in the trees. The roof sagged a little. There was a

stone-lined well out front, and a rust-colored chimney where smoke had risen a few times like

something trying not to be forgotten. The whole place looked like it had held out against time

longer than it should have - and lost just enough to feel honest.

"They didn't get rich," she added. "Just enough to live."

There was no sadness in her voice. No apology. She didn't talk like someone who wanted him

to feel bad for her. Just someone who didn't mind silence.

He nodded slowly. "That sounds perfect."

He let a few seconds pass. Then he said, "I got everything I ever wanted in the art world. Every

dream. Sold every piece in a show that was supposed to define my whole career. All at once."

She turned to look at him now, really look. Her eyes flicked over his face, still and clear.

She had known his pendant was unlike anything she'd ever seen - the kind of work that didn't

come from talent alone, but something rarer, something dangerous. And now that he'd said it -

that he was famous, known, sought after - it made perfect sense. Of course he was.

He wasn't just good. He was a genius. The best alive.

Her heart beat faster without asking permission.

Rachel liked rocks. A lot.

"And then I left," he said. "I came here. I love the old songs, the dancing, the stillness. This

country hurts when it sings. I wanted to live where the music comes from."

Her eyes lit faintly - just a flicker - but it was real. She shifted a little closer.

She reached for his hands then - slowly, not with force, just curiosity and warmth. Her fingers

were cold but soft, long and thin like dried willow leaves in spring. Her thumbs moved just

slightly across his knuckles like she was reading something.

"You don't talk like other men here," she said.

He looked down at her hands. "You don't look at me like anyone in America."

After they'd sat in silence watching the sun bleed into the treeline above the lake - a lake with

no name, only stillness and insect sounds - she spoke, without turning:

"Have you eaten?"

That was all.

He hadn't. But he didn't say so. He just stood, and she did too.

They walked together through the dark, the kind where your eyes adjust but never fully. No

flashlights. Just the faintest starlight falling between leaves somewhere high above. The dirt

road that connected their homes curved under trees beginning to shed. The

canopy was

breaking - not gone, but thinned in places. Long, cold beams of moonlight angled down. Every

dozen steps, a branch cracked underfoot, or dry leaves shifted in uneven patterns - brittle,

irregular, like something half-breathing. Whispers of wind moved through the high canopy, like

the forest whispering about them.

Only when they started walking did he see it - the sword low at her side. The leather had been

for that. Rachel wore a Shashka sword at her waist - not slung over her back like some relic,

but fastened to a thick leather strap low on her hip, where it moved with her stride. The sheath

and handle were made from Siberian larch wood, stained a dull maroon. The finish had worn

smooth with use, matte and dark as dried blood. No military mark. No factory shape. It was

handmade - simple, balanced, unspoken. Just wood, then the blade. Something a person from

here had made a long time ago. It wasn't ornamented, but it was beautiful, like the forest is

beautiful: old, exact, not asking for anything. She didn't mention the sword, and he didn't ask.

He carried a revolver for the wolves - old, reliable, and kept quiet in his coat. It wasn't

something they talked about. Just something that made sense out here.

Her house was about a hundred yards off the road, tucked behind a stand of larches - their

needles bright yellow, holding the starlight like a candle left burning just for them. You could walk

the open spaces at night, but not under the trees.

Silas's own place sat just fifty feet from the road. But hers was further in, beyond the reach of

habit. The path twisted in ways that already felt disorienting - not marked, not straight. It gave

the impression it would never look the same twice. And she walked it as if it were level ground.

Not once did she hesitate.

The town they lived beside, a mile away, wasn't really a town. The houses and buildings were

sparse and scattered, not all in one place. Just a handful of sunken dwellings and broken

chimneys, old timber buildings. Most stood half-empty. The places that

traded did so in silence

- meat wrapped in wax paper, firewood stacked by weight, dried mushrooms
bundled in old

newsprint. No lights. No signs. Just what was needed to live, nothing more.

The lake where they'd met sat thirty minutes on foot from both their homes.

He followed her past a rusted sled, a broken wheelbarrow, and an ax
half-buried in mud, until

they reached the cabin. And then -

It was the first time he stepped into Rachel's home.

Inside, her home was colder than his, but neater - everything had its place.
The kettle on the

stove, wool laid out to dry on the back of a chair. By the window, a wooden
shelf no wider than

her shoulders held a row of small, oval stones, all about the size of an egg
and an inch thick,

with a hole near the top on each for a leather necklace. They weren't
displayed like trophies.

They rested on folded cloth, quietly, as if asleep.

He stepped closer, and she followed him with her eyes, watching to see if
he'd recognize what

they were - not as minerals, but as parts of her.

"I shape them with these," she said, showing him a few large diamond hand files she kept nearby.

She picked up one of the stones - dark green, almost black in the dim light. "I use harder rocks after that. To smooth things down."

"Then I take animal fat and sand - I hammer the sand until it's powder. I rub it on a screen I made from leather and wood."

She didn't look at him as she spoke, but he watched every movement - how her fingers turned

the stone, how her voice carried no doubt. He felt his heart thudding, slower and heavier with

each word. She was not trying to impress him, and somehow that made every gesture feel

deliberate, exact. He was falling in love and didn't know how to stop it.

"I make the hole by chipping," she said. "With a diamond tip. Light hammer. I strike over and

over. When the hole is there, I smooth it with a round file."

Of course she didn't say where the tip came from. He doubted she'd ever even seen an electric

drill. The bit itself was meant to spin at high speeds, to bore into tile or tempered glass - but in

her hands, it had become something else entirely.

Silas nodded, his hands in his coat pockets. He didn't want to touch anything.

He was afraid to

disturb it - this still world that seemed to rise and breathe from her, shaped by her hands.

She smiled a little. Not wide, but genuine. "Then I finish with larch."

He looked up. "The tree?"

She nodded. "Siberian larch. I keep a wide piece - like a log, flat on one side.

I rub it with

animal fat and polish in circles. It leaves a waxy surface."

She disappeared for a moment into a back room and returned holding something flat and soft. A

book - or what was left of one. A children's book. The spine was barely attached. The cover

was bleached with sun, threadbare, its once-colorful illustration now a faint suggestion of reds

and blues.

She offered it to him the way someone offers a secret.

He looked closer. The dragon on the page was smiling with one fang, coiled

around a crumbling

castle drawn in soft lines. The colors were almost gone. The words on the page were in Russian

cursive, smudged and curling at the edges.

"I knew it was a dragon head on your pendant the moment I saw it," she said.

She sat beside him, not too close. He watched her face as she turned the page, careful,

reverent. Her eyes scanned each line like it had never faded. Like it still meant everything.

She was proud. Not childish.

The books still held value - not because they taught her, but because they were memories. No

one ever took them away. They were part of her, like a cup, or a sword.

She kept looking at the page for a long time. Then, softly, with something like wonder:

"We both like dragons."

That was all.

She stood up without saying anything and returned the book.

The pot of cabbage hung on a metal bar just above the fire in her wood-burning stove - the

same stove she used to heat the whole house. The fire had burned low while

she was out, but

when they got back, she added fresh wood. Now the heat had built up again, steady and dry,

warming the cast iron from beneath. The room smelled faintly of smoke, boiled greens, and old

iron.

Then she went to the stove.

She brought him a wide plate with a mound of dried meat and a big bowl of boiled cabbage in

the other. She set everything down without ceremony, but a kind of quiet pride. The meat was

salty and clean, the cabbage soft and hot.

He didn't speak, but she saw the way his eyes followed the plate. He was hungry.

She took her spoon and ate with him out of the same bowl. Next to each other.

After many stolen glances from both of them during that shared meal, which she could see in

his eyes was his kind of meal, he said "Thank you". Simply. With dancing eyes.

They fell asleep side by side on the couch resting against each other after having talked for

hours about rocks.

It went on like that for weeks.

Sometimes they met and didn't speak at all. Just sat near one another, or stood still as the light

disappeared behind the trees and the sky turned to ash. They would sit on the bench or lean

against the fence, their shoulders brushing, their hands linked loosely in the cold.

Silence wasn't absence. It had its own weight. And when she held his hand, it was like he'd

been handed a key to a room that never had to explain itself.

He started spending more time at her horse farm.

The place had clearly once been stronger - fences were bowing, hinges rusted, rails fallen. But

it wasn't ruined. It was just tired. Like something that hadn't been touched in a long time but still

remembered being loved.

They didn't talk about it. He just started fixing things.

It began with the gate. Then the loose boards on the corral. Then the roof shingles, a few at a

time. She didn't ask him to. She just watched from a few feet away, barefoot

most of the time

even as the chill deepened. Her steps made no sound in the straw or gravel,
and her hair

always seemed to find the wind.

By the second week, he was going there every other day. She would offer
him tea sometimes -

nothing fancy, just something warm in chipped ceramic mugs. And he would
sit in the kitchen

while the kettle whistled, watching the weak light try to fight its way through
the frost-glossed

windows. The smell of wood smoke became familiar, the stove that was
always lit but never

roaring. Just enough to keep the edge off the air.

She didn't have much. But it didn't feel empty. It felt like a place where
nothing unnecessary had

survived.

Autumn was almost gone. The ground began to harden in the mornings, and
his breath came

out in clouds. They didn't talk about the weather. But they both felt it. The
way people do when

they've learned to live close to the elements. He started wearing gloves when
he worked on the

fenceposts. She still didn't wear socks.

He'd catch himself watching her hands sometimes - long, pale fingers smoothing the horse's

mane, her nails still edged in earth. There was something about the way she moved that felt like

language.

One night, she spoke when the sky was nearly black.

"I never liked help," she said, brushing dust off the doorframe he'd just repaired. "But this

doesn't feel like help."

He looked at her, unsure if it was a question.

"It's not," he said. "It's just being near."

She smiled.

When Silas came here, he came to vanish.

Not exile, not escape. Something lower. Something quieter. A kind of death you live through.

Hiding is what people do when they hope to come back. He didn't.

He left with no forwarding address, no letters on the table. Didn't tell anyone. Just gone. Like

smoke in the wind. One day he was there, and the next, he wasn't.

Paid someone far too much to arrange it all - the visa, the freight, the transport of his tools, the

documents, everything. The silence. He'd worked with them before. Quiet people, the kind that

only nod and don't ask why someone with millions wants to live where wolves outnumber

people.

And he still had millions left. Useless, mostly. Money has no voice here. No meaning.

He never once had a smartphone. Not even then, in the 2020's. Only a black plastic flip phone,

battery that lasts a week, buttons you press like they mean something. No apps. No maps. No

updates. He had charged it once a month, sometimes less. A digital fossil - just like him.

And she matched it.

Rachel had never owned a phone. Never touched one. Never used the internet, not once. Had

never typed a word, never searched for anything, never seen a single moving picture meant to

entertain. There were no images in her mind that hadn't come from her own eyes. No noise

inside her. No flicker, no filter, no script. She had never been recorded, never uploaded, never

watched herself from the outside. She had only ever been present - fully, painfully, beautifully

so.

That's what undid him.

She just lives. In a way that burns through him like the cold wind that skims the river's black

edge at dusk. She grows her food. Not in gardens with apps and light meters, but in soil she

turns herself, by hand, with the same metal tool her father used.

She rides the old trails. Walks barefoot through thorns and frost. She knows how to kill what she

eats, but you can see in her face that she doesn't enjoy it. Her kitchen shelves are lined with

glass jars - dried flowers, leaves, bark, roots - enough for a hundred kinds of tea. She drinks

it bitter, with no sugar.

Winter had arrived without ceremony.

No storm. No first snow to mark it. Just a slow closing of color, and then a long, gray hush. The

leaves were gone. The sky hung low and metallic, and the sun, when it showed at all, barely

rose above the treetops before retreating again. The ground was frozen before anyone noticed.

Wind pushed through the trees in long, rising howls that never stopped. Everyone here had

been born to it - except Silas - and even they stayed inside.

But she came.

Always wrapped in thick wool. Always on her old horse who would sleep in the workshop.

When she entered the wind rushed in around her as if announcing something, then quieted the

moment she closed the door. Her hair, black as ink and slightly damp with frost, slipped out from

the hood of her blanket. Her boots were heavy with snow. Her breathing calm, but alive.

She didn't knock. She never had to.

She set her gloves by the stove and crossed the room to the small table where Silas had left

one of his old exhibition catalogs open under the candlelight. She leaned forward, elbows on the

wood, the blanket still draped across her shoulders.

He stayed by the fire, unsure if speaking would ruin the air. Her eyes tracked the pages slowly.

They were black - not dark brown, not charcoal, but black like volcanic glass - wide,

almond-shaped, and slightly tilted at the outer corners. Unreal. They held everything and gave

back nothing unless they chose to. He had looked into them once and nearly lost his breath.

She had not looked away.

Her voice came softly, not curious, but certain.

She turned the page.

Then stopped.

She looked at the piece.

And then she read.

Dark Mirror

Memories of darkness

take my breath

squeezing

fighting

the blood in my veins

pacing, punching, mumbling

at memories

seeded by a dragon

so long ago

a dragon's a cruel snake

magical

can't see one until after you're bitten

twisting coils

sounds that seem like words

are sparks

leaving nothing after they burn

burned and running

as fast as I can

into darkness and the unknown

my face a shadow

of a dragon.

She was silent for a long time after finishing.

Then closed the catalog.

Her voice came even lower than before - not shaken, not sentimental.

"The person who wrote that..." she said, eyes fixed on the table, "has been hunted by their own

memories. Not once. Not for a year. For a lifetime."

She spoke slowly, but without hesitation. Like each word had waited for a still enough room.

"You can tell when something is written in real pain. Because it doesn't try to explain itself. It

doesn't ask for help. It doesn't need a response."

She looked at the closed book.

"Whoever made that didn't want to be understood. They wanted to get it out before it killed

them."

Then she looked at him.

The candle moved in her eyes. Her face didn't.

"But it's not a cry."

"It's a record."

The wind picked up again - a long whine through the wood - but she didn't turn toward it.

"That's the kind of thing people bury. Or forget. Or blame themselves for. But whoever made

this..."

"They turned it into metal. And gave it a face."

A long silence. Then:

"That's not healing."

"That's revenge."

She didn't smile.

She just sat there, with the candle flickering between them.

Rachel stood up, moved to the far shelf, and came back carrying Dark Mirror. She held it in both

hands, careful as always, but not with hesitation. Her fingers had touched this metal before.

They knew its weight.

She set it down on the table in front of him, turned slightly so the light caught the dragon's eye.

Her own eyes followed the curve of the work for a long while.

"Silas," she said, slowly. "You know what this really is?"

He didn't answer. She knew he wouldn't.

"This isn't a pendant. It's a map."

She reached out and let her fingertip run along the surface - the thick texture, the looping

detail, the tooth-like ridges where his hand had scraped and rebuilt over and over.

"It's not symmetrical. It doesn't pretend to be clean. But everything flows. Every vent, every line

of wax you painted and stripped again, it reads like a pattern you couldn't see until you were

already halfway through making it."

Her finger rested lightly at the top - where the dragon curled.

"And this - this isn't just a creature." She tilted her head. "It's an idea that refused to stay

inside. Something ancient. Something that bit you so early you didn't even know you were

bleeding."

She turned to look at him fully.

"You crowned the dragon, Silas. You gave it a seat of power - and then you trapped it in wax

and burned it into metal. That's not design. That's alchemy."

He watched her fingertips now - how they moved across the surface like someone reading

Braille.

"The way you build from wax..." she continued, her voice almost soft enough

to disappear, "it's

not carving. It's memory. You don't remove material. You add. Like the pain
came first, and

you're building the body around it afterward."

She leaned forward, still tracing it.

"There's no vacuum-assist. No molds. You painted this with a candle and a
dental tool like a

monk preserving a dying language. And every time you stripped it down and
began again, you

told the truth a little more clearly."

She stopped. Pressed her fingers flat against the table. Looked up.

"Silas, this is not what people think art is." Her eyes locked with his, dark
and glassy and full of

something ancient. "This is grief in armor. Not soft. Not decorative. But
forged. Meant to last."

She reached for his hand.

"And you made it alone. In silence. With no one watching. No one telling
you it mattered. You

made it anyway. That's why it's holy."

Her voice dropped lower.

"When I first saw it, I didn't understand why I couldn't stop looking. Now I

do."

She paused. Took a breath.

"Because it's your face. Not how you look. How you exist."

She leaned into him then, her head resting against his collarbone. Her arms around his middle.

"You think no one sees you. But I do. I see you, Silas. And I love you for everything you never

said."

He didn't answer at first. He just held her.

Then, quietly - not rushed, not afraid - he said:

"I love you too."

Not because it was time. Not because it was expected.

But because it was true.

He had come here to leave the world behind.

And somehow, in its absence, he had found it.

They stayed like that for a long time.

Then came the next night.

That night, the world had disappeared.

The forest no longer looked like trees. Just black columns veiled in snow.

The sky had collapsed

into the earth, and the space between them was nothing but wind - constant, groaning,

unbroken. A wind that didn't move around you, but through you. A wind that buried sounds

before they finished leaving the throat.

The temperature had fallen so far it no longer felt like weather. Just judgment. Ten below, maybe

more. The kind of cold that made you question memory itself - whether summer had ever

existed, whether warmth was something you imagined. The kind of cold that steals without

asking, then waits to see what's left of you.

Then came the sound.

A loud, sharp breath - the kind only a horse could make. Not panicked. Not lost. Just there, in

the storm. Like it was calling him.

He went to the window, but the glass was useless - sealed in ice and snow, nothing but pale

light and frozen blur. He had to open the door.

And when he did, there they were.

Rachel, on foot, walking beside the animal. No rope. No panic. Just a figure and her shadow

moving through white oblivion.

She didn't tie the horse outside. She opened the side door to the casting workshop. The animal

ducked its head and entered without resistance, vanishing into the dimness like it had always

known the way. It did. That horse had slept there before. On nights like this.

They didn't say "I miss you." they just showed up.

They didn't say "I'm hurting." they just sat closer.

She was just there, coming out of the storm like it had released her.

Her boots struck the floor hard. Her hood slipped back. Her face was pale, lashes rimmed in

frost. She closed the door quietly behind her and stood still, breathing low. Her eyes met his.

Nothing needed to be said.

She was cold - truly cold - not defeated, but pushed to the edge of something. Her eyes,

those wide black mirrors, shimmered just slightly.

With pain. The kind that comes from doing something hard for someone else.

She had rode miles to see him that wind was brutal even that old horse must

have felt that ride

he thought.

He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her. His hands found the center of her back

through the wool and settled there, steady and warm.

She started to cry.

Not loudly. Not with sound. Her face didn't crumple. It just... cracked. Two slow tears slipped

from the corners of her eyes and ran down her cheeks as she stood in his arms. She didn't

move away. Her head pressed gently against his neck.

It was the first time he had seen her let anything break through.

She still had plenty of fight in her - he could feel it in the way her body stood straight, in the

way her breath evened quickly. But something inside her had bent. Just for a second.

He pulled her closer.

She looked up.

Neither of them spoke.

The kiss didn't come from boldness. It came from recognition.

They both leaned forward at the same time - not sudden, not desperate - just forward. As if

their bodies had been waiting for the permission their mouths hadn't given. Her lips met his

slowly.

Their noses brushed. Her hand found the side of his neck. They kissed again - slower - like it

might last forever if they let it.

She stayed pressed to him like she'd finally found something that didn't hurt.

He put Oleg Pogudin on loop - Love and Separation - his voice thin and aching and perfect.

Neither of them spoke. Their fingers stayed lightly locked.

There were more kisses. Between the silences. Between the choruses. Each one slower than

the last.

Something had passed between them. Something wordless.

And now it was sealed.

The fire had collapsed into its bones.

Rachel was already curled around him, her long body folded slow and sure under the blanket,

her skin cool in places where the heat hadn't reached. Her knee rested across

his thigh. One

foot tucked behind his ankle, her heel pressing gently like punctuation.

She didn't speak for a long time. Then, so low it barely counted as speech:

"Silas..."

A pause. Her breath moved against his chest.

"Your work isn't going to end properly."

He let her keep going.

"Bronze doesn't rot. Not like we do. It just waits. It waits in mud and fire and behind walls, and

then somebody stumbles on it hundreds of years later and has to decide whether or not it

mattered."

She adjusted slightly, her head burrowing under his chin.

"That's what your pieces are. Little deaths that don't die. They just stay quiet until someone's

ready."

Her hand rested across his ribs now, fingers soft but not loose. Like she was making sure he

stayed in place until she fell asleep.

"I think about the ones you buried." Her voice slowed. "Like prayers you

didn't want answered.

Just whispered. Sealed up in those little stainless coffins like they were dangerous. Or sacred."

Her legs shifted again, pulling him further into her.

"And the ones you gave away..."

A yawn came through her chest before it reached her throat.

"You don't even know where they've gone. You never will. Some will burn. Some will be pawned.

Some will stay in a drawer until someone opens it during a move and starts crying and doesn't

know why."

She sighed deeply, into his sternum.

"I love that."

She said it without drama. Like it was sleep talking. Like it had been true for years.

"I love that you don't want to control it. You just make them and let them go. Like little bronze

ghosts. Kind ones. Ones that still remember the hands that shaped them."

He felt her body fully soften now - the way it did when she was seconds from sleep.

"You don't need to be remembered, Silas. That's why you will be."

Her thigh moved up across his hip and stayed there. Her voice was barely breath now.

"I'll never leave you. I'll stay with you until we're buried under the same tree and someone finds

a crown and thinks it grew there."

He could've cried. But he didn't. Not with her wrapped like that. Not with her sleep breathing just

under his collarbone.

"You make beautiful endings," she whispered.

"The kind that don't tell you how it ends."

Then she sleep-talked, barely audible - a breath behind the words:

"Little bronze ghosts..."

And she was gone to sleep.

Still holding him.

Still wrapped around him.

Like she had no plans of letting the world have him back.

"Little bronze ghosts," he thought.

Tears ran down, slow and quiet. Only after he knew she was fully asleep.

Something in him broke clean and forever. From that moment on, she was written into his blood.

Spring didn't announce itself. It just stopped snowing, and the ground stopped resisting his step.

Silas had finished casting before noon - the mold poured, and the metal was cooling. The

smell of it still clung faintly to his clothes, but he liked it that way. It reminded him what the

morning had been spent building. The sun was still up, just a few hours left of it, and the walk to

Rachel's ranch felt longer only because he took his time.

When she spotted him approaching through the trees, she didn't call out. Just moved. Rachel

took the reins of another Yakutian as she hopped on her old horse, the only one she ever rode.

She didn't wear a saddle. She didn't need to.

She rode out to meet him, dark hair caught behind one ear, eyes narrowed slightly with purpose.

"Come on," she said when she reached him. "I want to find something."

He mounted behind her. The horse didn't flinch under the added weight - it just started

forward, slow and steady, used to silence and slope. They rode east for almost an hour, weaving

through birch and pine, low valleys still wet from melt.

He didn't speak. He didn't need to.

And he thought about where they were going now. The river.

The Yenisei. It moved through the land like it had forgotten how to stop - wide, silver, ancient.

He followed her along the edge, water at their ankles.

The stones around them were endless, each one different - some gray-blue, some russet,

some almost green. A few were speckled like eggshells. Others held thin veins of iron or quartz.

The current moved over them gently - slow, clear, constant.

Here, where the river narrowed, the bedrock ran high along the edge - some walls over fifty

feet tall, layered and split by age and thaw. Tree roots grew straight down the face of one,

clutching into cracks like fingers looking for truth. The water ran clear across stone like breath

over glass.

They searched quietly, moving from one patch of light to another. No words. Just gesture and

pause, hand to stone, tilt to light.

Fifteen minutes passed like mist.

Then she found it.

Rachel crouched, arm deep in the current, and came up with something in her hand - dark,

wide, curved by time. She stood and held it out to him.

A palm-sized oval - maybe an inch and a half thick. Almost perfectly shaped, black, smooth.

Not glassy. Not dull. Something else.

It was covered in the softest constellation of white dots - hundreds of them, faint, like the

after-image of snow.

She stared at it for a long time.

Then handed it to him, palm still open, her skin nearly white against the stone.

"This is Siberia," she said quietly. "This is me."

Her eyes met his. Those same volcanic black eyes framed by skin the color of milk. He

remembered winter - how she came. The snow didn't stop her. The dark didn't bother her. And

now this - a stone that looked like it had stored the snow inside itself.

It looked like her skin. It looked like her silence. Cold, beautiful, worn into meaning.

"It doesn't need shaping," she said. "Just polish. That's all. It's already what it's meant to be."

She stepped closer, the stone between them.

"Make me a little bronze ghost Silas," she said.

She touched his wrist, gently. Looked at him like a question she already knew the answer to.

"You'll know what to do with it. When it's time."

She stepped forward without a word and slipped the stone into his coat pocket - slow,

deliberate. Her eyes searched his for a moment longer, then she kissed him. Not for comfort.

Something else. A kiss like a vow, soft and soul-deep.

They rode back through the darkening trees, the light dropping faster now.

He didn't need to ask what this was. He knew.

Krasnoyarsk Krai, in the shadows of the Yenisei - it had been waiting. The river. The cold. The

forest and the stone. Her.

This wasn't chance.

It felt old. It felt written. Like something long ago had whispered forward through time just to

make sure they'd meet - not young, not early, but exactly now. As if every

grief had carved the
path.

He didn't believe in fate, but he believed in her. And in the quiet power of a
thing that returns

when it doesn't have to. He'd seen winter. He'd seen what stayed.

The sun rose as Silas drank his coffee on the porch, watching it pierce the
trees a thousand

times with golden swords. Not a cloud in the sky.

The heat hadn't peaked yet, but it moved through the shop slow and stubborn,
curling around

the tools like it was working too. Bronze dust clung to the seams in Silas's
boots. It was in his

lungs, under his fingernails, layered into every crack of the shop floor. Both
doors stood open -

not for breeze, but so the dust could find its way out. The light was hard,
coming in sideways

from the upper windowpanes.

Crowns, pendants, gauntlets - countless wax molds lay around, faces and
bodies for allegories

at the ready. Molds of famous works he could re-cast and bury. Pieces he'd
poured, re-poured,

and left to rest until they felt ready again.

He rested on one knee, holding each bronze piece steady in his left hand while cutting with the

bolt cutters in his right - switching between two pairs depending on the thickness of the sprue

or air vent.

Around a hundred castings, maybe more.

Not polishing. Not shaping. Just cutting.

Cut the button.

Shift the piece.

Cut the sprue. Cut the vent.

Then the next one.

Each casting had its own voice in the metal. A different tension. Some cracked off with a snap;

others held on like bone. Once the sprues and vents were gone, he sorted them into milk crates

- shelves packed three deep, side by side. The crates weren't labeled. Each one was just full

of castings ready for the next stage - grinding.

The floor was layered in bronze dust - fine, reddish-gray, like ash caught in sunlight. Most of it

settled near the cutting bench, but a soft cloud lingered across the whole space, stirring gently with each step.

The workshop itself was small. He didn't need much.

Fifteen square feet gave him everything: a row of grinding wheels, a flat lap for polishing, trays

of tools for setting stones - all within arm's reach. And for wax work, the setup had never

changed: a one-foot-square piece of black marble tile, set atop a stack of cut 2x4s, screwed

together with care. The tile was held in place by the lip of the screws - like a setting for a gem

- unmoving, dark, and cool to the touch.

Double doors stood at either end - left and right - always cracked open while he worked. Not

for light, but for air. The dust that rose when grinding metal didn't settle easily. He used fans

sometimes, but mostly relied on the draft.

He wore a full rubber gas mask with an NBC filter when the work required it - especially for

investment dust or when grinding metal. He only worked in there without the mask after he

hadn't been inside for days - long enough for the finest dust to clear. What remained on the

floor was heavier, easier to manage.

Outside, the heat had settled but hadn't grown worse. It hung in the still air under the canopy of

thick forest, held back just slightly by the trees.

Rachel was out near the horse enclosure, sitting on a log stump with a hoof knife in one hand

and a whetstone in the other. Her thumb passed slowly over the curved metal blade - worn

and slightly rusted at the back edge - then set it against the stone again. It made a soft rasp

each time she pulled it back. Not hurried. Just rhythm.

It was the tool she used most - not for cutting, but for scraping out packed dirt, trimming

overgrowth from the hoof wall, keeping the shape clean and even. She worked it carefully,

checking the angle against the light, her other hand tightening the grip around the handle. It

wasn't delicate work, but she did it with precision. With respect.

Her face was still. Her eyes - impossibly wide, - had a sleek, arresting shape that gave her an

unusual kind of beauty. It was the one feature no one ever questioned. They gave her a look of

constant watchfulness, intense and pure all at once.

Her eyes never stopped moving. Watching for signs. For stress. For change.

Her ears caught the sun. The way they angled through her hair, they almost looked like

something out of a sketchbook - a little too big for symmetry. A little too expressive. She'd

hated them for that. Her mother used to tug them when she was angry.

She'd heard the same about her feet. Always too long, too narrow. When she was twelve, her

shoes had to be ordered from the men's section. No one else in her class had to do that. None

of the boys let her forget it.

She remembered one afternoon not long ago - sitting beside Silas on the hill above the river,

both of them barefoot in the grass. The wind passed through the trees in long, hollow breaths,

like waves crashing or a crowd applauding from very far away. Their legs were stretched straight

out in front of them, ankles brushing. She looked down and noticed - her feet were a few

inches longer than his. But his were normal. Not small. Just hers... were different.

But he didn't flinch. He didn't shift. His hand had brushed hers once, absentmindedly, and

stayed there. She could see it in the way he looked at her feet - he thought they were

beautiful. And now she could see it too.

Her parents hadn't spared her. They weren't cruel out of rage - they were just eroded by the

years, ground down to blunt edges that still cut. They'd had her late in life - her mother was 42

when Rachel was born. By the time she turned 35, they were both gone.

That was a few years before she met Silas. They made vodka from potatoes they grew

themselves. It wasn't celebration. It was escape. They drank every night, sometimes starting

before the sun was down, moving through it like a second shift. It didn't make them warmer. It

made them quiet, then mean. The kind of mean that didn't yell - the kind that lowered its voice

and spoke too close to your face. The kind that left her flinching before anything even

happened. There were times a hand would come too fast, too sharp, and then be gone like it

never happened. And no one spoke of it. Not the next day. Not ever.

Rachel grew up in a house full of that silence. Her father's voice would dip low with drink, his

words delivered like a weight - not loud, but meant to land. Her mother, smaller but sharper,

could turn a look into a punishment. Affection didn't live there. Not for long. They didn't scream.

They didn't apologize. They just stared through her sometimes - as if she was something they

hadn't meant to plant.

Their deaths weren't tragic. Just expected. Like the stove going out, or frost coming early.

Rachel buried them both without ceremony. Without help. She didn't cry.

She'd inherited the land, the animals, the debts. Everything else she built herself.

And in all those years, no one had ever called her beautiful without laughing first.

No one except Silas.

She was six foot three.

She was thin, but not fragile. Nothing bony, nothing sharp. Just sleek - the kind of build where

everything flowed into the next part. Long arms, long legs, narrow waist, high hips. She looked

drawn more than born - designed with lines, not points.

But the scale of it unsettled people. Her feet were too long. Her ears too wide. Her eyes too

large. All of it together was too much - strange in a way that couldn't be explained, only

noticed.

It made her quiet. It made her clever.

It made her watch people before they watched her.

Her parents had warned her. Not kindly. Not once.

"You'll never know love, looking like that," her mother said on more than one occasion -

sometimes while folding laundry, sometimes while peeling potatoes, never with any intention of

being cruel. Just honest, in her mind.

Her father had said it differently. "No one wants to be towered over," he muttered once, when

she stood to leave the dinner table. "Makes a man feel smaller than he is."

She was fourteen. She never forgot the phrasing - not smaller, but smaller than he is. As if her

height distorted others.

She remembered looking down at him then, the top of his thinning scalp suddenly visible in a

way it hadn't been before. And for a moment, she understood why he resented it. But the

understanding didn't soften anything.

She had been looking down her whole life. At shelves, at classmates, at people who wanted her

to fold. She learned not to stand too straight. Not to enter rooms too quickly. To take up less

space with her posture, if not her body.

The few boys who paid attention didn't stay long. They made jokes. Called her "birch tree." She

never gave them the satisfaction of flinching. But it landed anyway.

She hadn't told Silas these things. Not yet.

She thought about how he didn't flinch when she stood close. The way he never joked. Never

tried to make her smaller. He looked at her like he was lucky just to be near her - like the

distance between their heights was a kind of offering, not a gap.

She'd never been looked at like that before.

That night, long after the horses had gone still, she walked out into the open dark and looked up

at the stars. There was no music, but she moved anyway - small, precise steps drawn from

dances she hadn't performed since childhood. Her fists rested on her hips, elbows proud, chin

lifted in the cold. Her heels clicked softly against the earth as she traced the old patterns -

backsteps, pivots, pauses held like breath.

She didn't dance to be seen. She danced because her body remembered something her mind

had nearly forgotten - a defiance carried in the feet, a silence turned to motion.

She moved like someone claiming space they were once told not to take.

And somewhere behind the movements, behind the tilt of her shoulders and the press of her

heel to the dirt, was the girl she'd once been. Watching from the tree line. From the silence.

From the past.

Now she danced for her.

Now she danced because she could.

Silas hadn't planned to stop by. He just found himself walking. The days were growing longer

now, and the heat had broken for a few hours. The air was still thick but bearable, the sky a low

gradient of smoke and gold. In Krasnoyarsk Krai, the beginning of summer was not always clear

- not exactly. But this felt close.

The horse ranch came into view through the trees. There was no fence, just the dip in the land

and the sound of hooves - a kind of breathing. Silas stepped quietly down the trail and paused

at the edge of the clearing.

She was lying in the grass.

For a second, he thought she might have been resting - watching the sky, perhaps. But when

he stepped a little closer, he saw the stillness in her shoulders, the slack in her hand over her

stomach.

She was asleep.

Truly asleep.

Out in the open, with no blanket, no pillow - just the rough fold of one arm beneath her head

and the other across her belly. Her hair was spread around her like something the wind had left

behind. One leg bent gently across the other. The kind of sleep that came only from being worn

down to peace.

The old horse stood beside her.

Not grazing. Not wandering. Just... standing. Guarding. His weight shifted, but he didn't move

far - his shadow stretched across her shoulder like it had been there for hours.

It was very

clear he was watching over her.

It was the same horse that followed her everywhere. Not one of the ones she sold. He had a

jagged scar just off-center on the top of his skull - a deep groove where the hair refused to

grow. He never left her side.

Silas dismounted and approached quietly.

He didn't call her name. He just crouched beside her and looked.

She had been dancing again - he could tell. The grass was bent, not trampled, and there were

small marks in the dirt. It was her rhythm. Her way.

The sky was barely beginning to brighten behind the hills.

He slipped one arm under her knees, the other behind her back. She didn't wake, not even

when he stood. She only shifted slightly, her head pressing into his chest.

He carried her all the way to the house.

The door creaked open as it always did. He laid her down gently on the couch, pulled a light

cotton blanket over her. She sighed once, turned toward the backrest, and did not stir again.

The kitchen was dark but familiar. He scooped coffee into the pot - one extra, just for strength

- and let it brew while the sun began crawling across the window ledge.

She woke to the smell. Blinked slowly. Then smiled - that slow, heavy kind of smile that only

appears when sleep has been good.

Silas handed her a mug without a word.

She sat up, her hair falling over her shoulders, and took it.

For a while, they just drank.

Then, as the warmth settled in, he asked:

"That horse. The one with the scar. Why does he follow you like that?"

Rachel didn't answer right away. She leaned back into the old wooden chair and set her mug on

the windowsill. Outside, the trees were moving like thought - slow and circling.

"Nothing exciting ever happens around here," she said, almost smiling. "But once, something

did."

Silas waited. Her voice carried that edge - not guarded, just deliberate. Like she was laying

something down with weight.

"I've never told you how my parents died."

He nodded once.

"My father... he was angry a lot. For small things. That day, it was the firewood. Said I was late

chopping it.

"He started yelling... and twisting my ear. I cried out. He was about to slap me - but when he

drew his hand back..."

She nodded toward the window. The horse stood about thirty feet away,

staring at the house.

That powerful, strange, ever-present guardian.

"...he bit his hand. My father went into a blind rage. He was drunk. He grabbed a hammer... and

struck him in the head."

Her lips pressed tight. Her head lifted slightly - a reaction she didn't seem to notice.

"He turned so fast, I didn't even see it. And kicked him. Right in the center of his face."

She paused.

"He died instantly."

Then, quieter:

"My mother passed a few months later. She drank too much vodka."

Another pause. Then:

"One night, I woke up... middle of the night... she was calling for me. Over and over. Asking if

she was going to die."

She looked down at her hands.

"I found her throwing up blood."

"The horse was my best friend," she said.

"Before I met you."

Not softly. Just plainly.

"He was born when I was fourteen," she added.

Silas did the math. Rachel was thirty-eight now. That made the horse twenty-four.

Old. Near the end. Another winter might take him.

And Silas knew: he would be there when it happened. And he would help her through it. That

was all.

He remembered her saying her mother was forty-two when Rachel was born. He thought about

the years she had spent with no one but that animal. The way he followed her like a shadow.

How he had stayed standing in that field while she slept. It was dangerous to sleep outside in a

forest like this - deep, black, full of wolves. Even though the horse was her riding horse, she

never used a saddle. Too poor to own one. Didn't want one anyway.

It carried only a strap - a leather sling holding a shaska sword.

Even when she walked or rode the horse, even when she slept alone in the dense forest - she

always wore that shaska around her hips. Silas knew she wasn't careless. She wasn't naive.

Even if, somewhere inside her, she trusted the horse to stand between her and death, it wasn't

fantasy. That strap around his neck wasn't decoration. The sword was tradition. Taught. Every

member of her family had one - not a gun - for wild animals like wolves. Because here,

toughness wasn't a virtue. It was survival.

And still, she chose to sleep in that field. Not from recklessness. From certainty. That's what

stunned him most. Her bravery wasn't loud. It was built-in. Lived-in. That kind of quiet

fearlessness - it wasn't performance. It was something older than language.

And it was something he recognized.

His grandmother had passed a very long time ago - a woman just over four feet tall with a

barrel chest and strong shoulders, whose blood carried Tarahumara and Aztec roots on her

mother's side, and whose father was part Indigenous, African, and Spanish.

Three of his grandparents had blue eyes and blond hair. Silas had black hair, greenish-brown

eyes, and a faint brown tint to his skin. His build - stocky, strong-backed, broad-shouldered -

was more like hers than any of theirs. The same barrel chest. The same face shape. His nose

was wider than those blue-eyed grandparents. His nostrils flared out, just like hers had. He

looked like her grandson.

And yet he had been bullied. For being lighter. For being different. For not fitting anywhere

clearly.

He had moved across five different states, living in multiple places in each. Twice, he had lived

in Japan. The first time, just before he turned nine. His first kiss happened there - during

cherry blossom season - right after getting off the school bus. She had pulled his beanie down,

kissed his cheek, and run. When he pulled the hat back up, he saw her looking over her

shoulder, laughing. Her black hair swirled like it was suspended in the wind. Petals spun through

the air. Bamboo leaned over barbed wire. Gnarled cherry blossom trees whispered above the

concrete buildings of a fading Navy base.

His mother had been in the Navy, a single parent. She was a good mother, but she was gone

often. And a thousand Navy men had raised him too - most of them just for a moment or two,

but they tried. They taught him things. They were disciplined. He learned.

And from his grandfather - a firefighter, a hero - and from nearly every relative on every side,

even those from the Indigenous side, who had fought in some war, he learned that resilience

could be inherited like anything else.

They were both sitting now - same chairs as always, the mugs between them cooling on the

table.

Rachel didn't look sad. She looked exact.

"The horse has a scar. You've seen it?"

Silas nodded.

"I know you fractured your skull," she said.

She tilted her head, watching the steam rise from her mug.

"That's what connects you two. Neither of you left me."

Her voice didn't tremble. It wasn't meant to. This wasn't confession - it was chess. The kind of

truth one arrives at slowly, then carries forever.

"He took the first blow for me," she said. "And you've taken everything else since."

Silas didn't speak. He didn't look away, either.

"Both of you had head injuries," Rachel said. "And both of you stayed."

She set her cup down gently.

"One of you watched over me for half my life. The other knew how to hold my mind like it wasn't

broken."

Then softer, but still deliberate:

"Trusting him taught me how to trust you."

She didn't blink. Didn't shift.

Silas looked at her the way he had that first night in the river - completely, but without intrusion.

Rachel leaned back slightly in the chair. She wasn't finished.

"You want to know why I've never asked you to explain what happened?" she said.

"Because I've already seen what came after. And it was enough."

There was no drama. No sentiment. Only understanding at full weight.

A few weeks of sun passed - quiet and steady. Casting. Tending horses. Nothing more.

Rachel woke without ceremony. She simply opened her eyes, stood, and stepped into the light.

The air outside carried the scent of fresh leaves - everything growing, pressing upward, still

damp from its own effort. Somewhere, a fly buzzed itself silent against a windowpane.

She didn't change her clothes. Didn't comb her hair. She just walked - barefoot out of the

house, past the troughs, down the narrow trail that led toward Silas's place. There was no real

reason. She just wanted to see what he was doing.

A few minutes down the path, she stopped.

A crow stood hunched over a dead bird - its shape unrecognizable at first. The crow worked at

it with calm precision, tugging loose a strip of flesh, then repositioning. A silent meal.

Rachel didn't blink.

She didn't look away.

It wasn't shocking. It wasn't sad. Just another page turning in a book that never stops.

Something had ended - and because of that, something else would continue.

She stepped past it without a word.

The trail curved gently through the forest. She kept walking.

She had never minded waiting. Perhaps it had been forged in her, after all those childhood

years spent waiting - waiting for the heavy silences in her parents' small home to break,

waiting for her mother's cold hand to retreat, for the sting of that indifferent touch to fade. For

Rachel, patience had never been a virtue. It was something older. Something permanent. It

lived in her bones, her walk, her silence. It followed her with every barefoot step through the

melancholic, Russian forest that had raised her.

It was late morning by the time the early summer sunlight began to filter softly through the wood

of Silas's workshop. Rachel moved quietly across the muddy path, stopping just short of the

doorway. She stood still in the shade, silent as ever, blending easily into the shadows. It came

naturally to her - the art of watching without being seen. She had practiced it for a lifetime.

Silas didn't know how often she'd watched him like this - not intruding, not interrupting. Just

bearing witness to the moments he believed were his own.

She saw him clearly now from her place at the threshold. He sat on a low stool, staring at the far

wall, eyes wide but unseeing.

It was a look she knew well. A gaze suspended between this world and another. A place he

disappeared into often, especially after he had spent long hours casting. His jaw was tight. The

sorrow behind his eyes moved like distant stars.

Rachel knew that place too.

And she waited.

She saw him clearly from her hidden place. He sat on a low stool, staring at the far wall, eyes

wide but unseeing. It was a look she recognized: a look trapped somewhere between worlds. A

place Rachel knew he visited often, especially after he had spent long hours working. She saw

the tension in his jaw, the quiet suffering flickering behind his eyes like distant stars. Rachel was

no stranger to his suffering, or his strength. Often, she'd quietly turn away, allowing him dignity

in his solitude. Other times, she would simply wait in silence, her presence a soft, unwavering

beacon just beyond the reach of his distracted gaze.

Today, though, was different. Today, the stillness that wrapped around Silas had a sharper,

heavier edge. He sat unmoving, his fists tightly clasped, knuckles pale. Rachel gently leaned

her head against the doorframe, her breathing calm, unhurried. She thought of the many times

she'd witnessed him lost in these depths before - his eyes heavy and distant, his lips

murmuring silent conversations with invisible ghosts. She had never mentioned these private

moments, never disturbed them, understanding instinctively that they were as much a part of

him as the strength in his shoulders and the gentleness in his hands.

She had seen him pacing, mumbling to himself, lost in battles that only he could see. Once,

from this same quiet vantage, she'd watched him fiercely punching the air,
eyes wide, fighting

ghosts invisible to all but him. Another time, he held a heavy piece of metal
cocked back, eyes

wide, lips moving rapidly as if arguing passionately with some internal
adversary. Rachel

understood these moments better than anyone might have imagined,
understood they were

born from an injury he rarely spoke about - something from his earliest years.
She knew also

of the scars he carried from fights - not countless, but enough - invisible
wounds that ran

deeper than the marks left by fists. She felt his quiet mourning of the two
beloved friends he'd

lost, grief that wrapped itself gently around him like a shadow, a sorrow he
held quietly, tenderly.

Rachel saw clearly, too, the weight of constant displacement, each move
pulling roots from his

heart, leaving behind fragments of a home he never truly knew. And she saw
the subtle, delicate

marks of the mental burdens he carried - moments of deep melancholy, the
restless cycles of

his mind, the obsessions he fought quietly each day, and the haunting memories that whispered persistently, never truly letting him rest.

It did not frighten her, any of it.

Rachel had seen it all, each stolen glance into the world he kept hidden from everyone else.

And in every moment she watched unnoticed, she had grown to love him more deeply. She

recognized the beauty of his struggle: not madness or frailty, but strength. Each heavy breath he

took, each murmur he spoke, was a testament to his endurance, his will to remain connected,

fighting tirelessly against the pull of that invisible world.

She stepped into the doorway softly now, her shadow blending into his space with delicate care.

Silas didn't notice immediately, eyes fixed unblinkingly ahead. Rachel paused again, barefoot in

the dust and shavings, the grainy texture soothing beneath her feet. Her voice emerged, soft,

clear, and gentle.

"Silas?"

He stirred slowly from his reverie, as if emerging from a deep, dense fog. His eyes flickered with

initial confusion, settling gradually into a shy, vulnerable recognition.

"Rachel," he whispered softly, almost like a question.

She moved closer, slow, unhurried, patient. There was no judgment in her eyes, only profound

warmth and understanding. Rachel sat beside him on another low stool, the silence between

them rich and comforting, not needing words to fill the quiet space.

"I see you sometimes," she said finally, her voice almost a whisper, but clear.

"In these

moments."

Silas's eyes lifted sharply, briefly afraid, before quieting again beneath her calm gaze. "You do?"

She nodded gently. "Yes."

He lowered his eyes again, uncertain, embarrassed. Rachel touched his arm, the contact

careful, gentle, reassuring.

"Silas, your injury does not scare me, it never has," she continued quietly.

"What you carry within

yourself, this weight you bear - I love you more for it. It's beautiful to me."

He inhaled deeply, a tremble in his chest, feeling the vulnerability he feared most become

something cherished in her presence. Her eyes were luminous with honesty.

"I never knew you saw," he whispered.

She smiled gently, sadly, her large eyes rich with the depth of shared pain.

"You fight battles you

never speak of. And you think it makes you weaker, somehow lesser. But it's why I trust you,

Silas. Because you understand suffering. You appreciate the simple, delicate things - the quiet

beauty that most people overlook."

His eyes rose to hers again, searching deeply, seeing her clearly. "It hurts sometimes. It pulls

me away."

"I know," she said simply, her voice warm. "And still you stay here, with me."

He sat quietly, considering. "I never wanted you to see it."

Rachel smiled softly, shaking her head. "I'm glad I did. It shows me your strength. It reminds me

we're not alone, not really."

They sat silently in the dim workshop, sunlight drifting slowly across the

floorboards. In this quiet

moment, Rachel felt something profound settle between them, a silent acknowledgment deeper

than words, deeper than touch.

"Thank you," he whispered finally, voice thick.

Rachel did not reply immediately. Instead, she reached down slowly and gently took his hand in

hers. His fingers curled quietly around hers, warm and certain.

"No," she said softly. "Thank you. For allowing me to see."

The shadows lengthened in the small workshop, and still, they did not speak again for a long

time, the quiet holding them carefully, reverently, until finally, Rachel stood gently, tugging his

hand with hers.

"Come," she said simply, a tender smile curving her lips. "Let's walk."

They both woke to the sound of birds - soft, scattered, like the shimmer of the lake they hadn't yet stepped into. The air outside the cabin was barely moving.

By the time they reached the water, the sun was behind the outcrop - a jagged rise of stone that held its own knot like an old wound. The lake curved inward here. A deeper basin,

shaded and still, where the pike
came to wait.

They stepped in together. The water met their thighs, then their waists. It was
colder here than anywhere
else they'd found. Rachel liked it. Silas did too.

To their left, above the bedrock, the spruce were thick. A stand of them -
darker than the birch, heavier
than the larch - leaned forward from the ridge. One tree reached farther than
the rest. Its roots spread
wide across the stone behind them like a great spider, gripping. It bent
toward the lake at a strange angle,
casting a crooked shadow over the cove.

From the same ridge, dragonflies lifted into the sun. Their wings threw
flickers like blade edges.

They both liked dragons.
These ones belonged to the sky.
Nothing chased them here.
And nothing pulled them down.

He had made the casting lures out of pure silver. Nothing caught a pike's eye
more than a hammered
spoon. They were thicker than the store-bought ones - for durability, since
silver was soft, but this made
them look like they had more meat on them. Rachel loved that Silas made
these. They worked. Well.

The lures held countless small hammer marks, like scales - but brighter than
any fish's scales ever were.
The pike always hit them. Hard.

They cast toward the deepest part.

One took her spoon first. A sharp pull, then stillness. She set her jaw slightly, but said nothing.

The light moved across the trees, never touching their faces. The outcrop kept it away. Everything else belonged to the lake.

Rachel shifted her stance. "They'll stop feeding soon."

Silas nodded, line still in the water.

They caught three more before leaving.

The dragonflies followed them back.

The forest spoke enough for both of them.

The sounds were light and close. Insects buzzed low to the ground. Birds called from the trees above, short

sharp notes, sometimes overlapping. The leaves on the younger trees were still soft, almost rubbery -- they

tapped against each other when the wind passed through, more like cloth than paper.

They walked calmly through dense shrubs and tangled wildflowers, pushing through the younger spruce like

saloon doors -- the branches flopped back behind them, soft but stubborn. The birch and larch let them through

without a sound.

Silas said nothing, but Rachel could feel him sliding inward -- the quiet kind of collapse that didn't show on

his body but dimmed something in his walk. His memories always came in layers. The longer they walked, the

deeper they pulled. She had seen it before.

They crossed pockets of cool shade, then warmth. The trail shifted underfoot -- cracked roots, fern clumps that

brushed their knees. Rachel adjusted the fish on her shoulder. Silas walked just behind her.

Rachel kept glancing back. Not often. Just enough to watch his eyes. They hadn't changed yet, not fully -- but

they were heading there. She could feel it like the shift in weather before a storm, the weightless drop in

pressure. His eyes didn't move like they should. They stayed still too long in the wrong places. The distance

between steps stayed even, but the space behind them grew. Not on the trail. On him.

There was no muttering yet. But she could tell. She always could. It started in his gaze -- that far-off stare that

looked like it was trying to see something too deep to bring back. Then the corner of his mouth would shift,

and the line of his jaw would tighten like he was bracing for something.
After that, his shoulders would start to

hold themselves too high. Not in defense -- in restraint. As if his whole body
was flexing without moving.

She didn't speak. She just watched him between the turns. Between the
heavier trees, when they had to duck or

push aside branches.

By the time they reached the edge of the clearing, the ghost world
had already wrapped itself around his

shoulders. She just walked ahead and let the house rise into view.

Inside, she dropped the fish into the small metal tub resting on the table. It
was thick, heavy-built -- the same

larch as everything else in the room. Four legs, wide planks. Not made to
wobble. A second tub, dented and

round, stood near the back wall for bathing.

Silas stood near the wall, mumbling under his breath. Not a word she
could catch. Just a low thread

unraveling. His shoulders were stiff, his eyes too far away.

She crossed the room and kissed him on the eye -- not the cheek, not the lips.
Just there, where his gaze had

slipped too far inward. As if the touch might pull his vision back from the
ghost world -- back to the walls, the

fish, the heat, the summer. Back to her. It was the kind of kiss meant not for affection, but for anchoring. For

calling someone home.

Then her hands moved beneath his shirt -- both hands, slow and steady. She touched his ribs, his sides. During

a dark time in his life, something had happened that he told her about once, in a quiet moment. Two men were

repeatedly punching him -- from either side -- over and over, for more than a minute, mostly to his ribs, sides,

and stomach. He never fell during it. That story had stayed with her. Her fingers moved to that place now --

not as comfort, but as acknowledgment. The second she touched it, his body reacted. Not all of it -- just under

the skin, a sudden tightening. Like something broken deep inside had never healed right. His body did it

without him. She didn't know what it was, only that whatever they'd done to him had changed something --

and it never went back.

His body pulled tight. He groaned -- a sound stretched between pain and something almost sensual. His eyes

lowered. His stomach clenched. The whole gesture lasted seconds.

She didn't stop.

She rubbed small, careful circles with the pads of her fingers. His face grew smaller in expression, drawn

inward. She could see it. He was seeing himself small again.

"Go lay down," Rachel said.

He didn't argue. Just turned and went.

Her bed wasn't really a bed. Four legs. A rectangle of thick beams. On top, smooth planks laid edge to edge.

All of it the same old dark brown larch as the walls. A massive wool-stuffed cushion lay across it, held in what

looked like a stitched wool sack. The mattress was two feet thick. Handmade, all of it. Wool, linen, wood.

No windows. Just thick timber walls that hadn't shifted in years. She didn't light candles. It was summer, and

some light came in on its own. He was sensitive to it, especially when he didn't feel right.

He lay on his back. She curled beside him -- long limbs folding slowly, one leg draped over him, her cheek

pressed full against his. They barely fit, but that was part of it. The mattress gave under their weight. They

sank deep, like into warm earth. They lay still for almost an hour. No one moved.

When they rose, he started boiling cabbage. She cleaned and filleted the fish.

He finished first.

She looked out the window.

The old horse was still there, a stone's throw away. Silas had stepped outside, grabbed the brush, and walked

to him. He started brushing slowly, with his right hand.

She could feel it from where she stood -- the way his left hand rose and closed around something that wasn't

there. His grip tightened so fiercely she could see it from where she stood. He was holding something

invisible. She knew what it was.

The moment lasted a few seconds. Then he threw it -- hard -- into the empty space in front of him. His eyes

were wild, like he was staring someone down.

Then it passed.

He switched hands. Kept brushing.

He mounted the horse and rode, bursting forward like he was breaking free of something. They ran a hundred

yards and back again, again and again. They needed it -- both of them. The horse wasn't built for speed, but he

was giving everything he had. He needed to be here, to stay in the now. Rachel watched from the window

without moving. She knew what this was. He hadn't just thrown the hammer -- he'd caught it. In his mind. He

was stopping it before it landed this time. The hooves pounded the ground like it owed him something. Dust

rose and fell and rose again. She could barely breathe watching it. Not from fear -- but from awe. They weren't

running. They were staying alive.

She fried the fish while watching him ride -- no flour, no salt, just heat. The pan hissed as he cut back and

forth through the clearing, always at full speed, as if motion itself could hold the past off.

Twenty minutes passed.

He stepped inside -- breath steady, eyes clear again. The fire was back. That look he had when everything

inside him lined up.

She set the bowl of cabbage on the table, then looked at him. Just once.

"You two," she said.

When their eyes met, it hit like a blow. A lifetime of being alone and hurt moved between them without a

word. It felt like a kiss.

The image of her hadn't left him.

The night she came, the wind was blowing hard from behind. Her hair flew forward in sharp lines,

straight out -- like spikes. The night she came in that blizzard, in the wind, for him.

That was his vision. The exact moment. And that would be the face. The last he would ever sculpt in

this life. He would never mold another.

He took out the sheet wax. He cut out three oval shapes, each the same size -- then stacked them

carefully to form a solid base for her face.

He held the dental spatula to the flame. Once hot, he ran the flat edge along the seams -- slowly,

deliberately -- fusing the layers one by one. Then he reheated. Did it again. And again. Tool to

flame, to wax, back to flame.

The second wax was his own. He made it in a cooking pot. Inside: beeswax, olive oil, bits of dental

sheet wax, and hard sticky sprue wax used to join sprues or anchor sprues to the base. He stirred

until it smoked. He let it cool, then scraped bits out to use as he went -- a putty-like feel, slightly firm

but not too soft.

A sliver at a time, he squished the mix into small balls and pressed them one after the next onto the

base. They weren't exact. They didn't need to be. He shaped as he built.

He pressed in the glass eyes.

Then he scraped it in ribbons with the edge of the spatula. Held each strip over the flame. Waited

just long enough. Then touched it to the form -- molten, not soft. A fine line between ruin and control.

He moved it across the surface like painting. Then scraped it away. Then painted again. Layer by

layer, he built it up.

Sometimes he stepped back for long stretches, didn't look at it at all -- just to return with fresh eyes.

Then he'd change one small thing: a millimeter on the brow, a shift near the cheek, a softened fold

beneath the jaw.

When the face was finished, he mixed the mold -- two components blended by hand. No vacuum to

remove bubbles. Just chemistry and timing.

He brushed the mixture carefully onto the surface, letting the bristles collapse the air bubbles as he

worked. That was the reason for a one-sided mold -- the only way to control it without machines.

Then the special wax -- zero shrinkage -- heated in a separate pot. He dabbed it with a brush into

the cured mold, collapsed every bubble with a steady beat. Waited. Filled the rest.

He gave her hair direction. The way it had looked that night stepping in out of the blizzard to see
him.

Her ears were there, too. Not shrunk, not adjusted. Proud. Wide. Beautiful. It was all from memory --

and somehow, it looked more like her than she did.

There was something in the face that only she would notice. A softness. A truth. His version of her.

To anyone else, it would seem exact. But she would see what he had added -- what he couldn't help

but show. Love.

He had polished Rachel's stone -- the one she found in the river. It looked like snowfall during a

pitch-black night.

He took a piece of sheet wax and placed it over the stone. The warmth from his hand softened it just

enough. It draped slowly, forming a mold around the high dome of the cabochon. Once it held

shape, he cut an oval window -- careful, centered -- to leave just enough of the stone visible.

Then the face. He placed it at the top of the cabochon, building wax up and around it. Her hair

flowed outward, balanced by stylized branches angled and placed with purpose -- not symmetry, but

weight. They curved and framed her in three dimensions.

Everything around her face pushed outward: the texture of the snow he made to look more like

moss, to enhance it -- colder, heavier, clinging to the upper edges of the branches and the natural

high points. The outline of the pendant was organic -- uneven, alive, and balanced.

Then on the back, he shaped two thick wax loops, one on each side for the cotton cord, and cut six

rectangular strips from more sheet wax. After casting, he would bend those inward to hold the stone

in place -- strong, tight, permanent.

He carefully placed sprues and air vents.

He mixed the investment by hand, painted the first layer on with a brush --

slow, tapping strokes to

catch every detail and collapse the air bubbles in the investment powder from mixing.

Once coated, he placed a perforated casting flask around the mold. The holes in the flask would let

gases escape. He had already taped all the way around the flask to keep investment from leaking

through the holes. Then he sealed the edge with tape, where metal meets wood.

Then he poured the rest in.

He waited. Once it set, he gave it an hour, then placed it into the kiln.

1350 degrees Fahrenheit -- high enough to burn out the wax completely. It took hours. Then he

dropped it to 1100 -- the casting temperature of the mold. He turned on the melting furnace -- over

2000 degrees -- just past liquidity.

When it was ready, he poured. He let it cool overnight.

In the morning, he removed the hardened investment off the mold. Chopped off the sprues and air

vents with bolt cutters. Polished the surface -- from rough to fine, grit by grit.

Then he set the stone -- the river stone Rachel had chosen -- into its oval

cradle.

Then the cotton cord. Thick. Strong.

He held the pendant in both hands. It didn't feel finished. It felt permanent.

The gentle breeze and warmth carried Rachel to his door with the ease of a leaf in motion.

He was in the workshop. The door was open, like it always was when he worked.

She stepped inside without a word.

Silas sat in the workshop, facing the open door. The sky outside was clean and blue - no wind, no

clouds. Just still light. He wasn't moving. His left ankle rested across his right knee, and his face was

angled slightly down. The bucket hat he always wore was pulled low over his eyes, the way it got

when the day was too much. The sunlight reached to his feet but didn't touch his face.

He was holding a pendant, resting it on his left calf - probably one he had just finished.

She walked in slow, quiet steps.

She moved beside him, seeing his face in quiet profile.

"Silas?" she said, soft.

He didn't move.

Not right away.

Her eyes went to him first, then down at what he was holding.

She looked at it and knew.

The first words came like something remembered, not said.

"You made me a little bronze ghost, Silas."

He didn't nod. Just turned the piece so she could see it fully.

Her lips trembled before she could stop them. Her eyes - wide, not blinking - stayed on the pendant

like it was breathing.

"My little bronze ghost," she whispered.

She reached out - slow, steady - and took it from his hand. Her thumb passed over the hair, her

face, then the branches, then the snow texture, and then the cabochon - snow-covered - like winter

caught in stone.

Silas looked at her, steady.

"That night in the blizzard," he said. "When you walked through the door. The wind pushed your hair

straight out in front of you like something was carrying you in."

Rachel laughed once - not loud, just sharp. "Of course you remembered that."

She stepped outside, pendant in hand.

The light hit it gently. The bronze didn't shine - it held. Its surface caught nothing it didn't mean to.

And that was the beauty of it: the restraint. The dignity.

Rachel looked down at it. Then held it up to her chest.

This wasn't something to be worn for display.

It was for remembering.

"This," she said, almost to herself, "is the part of me no one ever believed existed."

She wasn't crying. But her voice shook like someone who finally got a name back after it had been

misused for too long.

Silas stood just inside the doorway.

She tied the cord behind her neck and let it rest against her chest - not light, not heavy. Just there.

Like it had always belonged.

Her hand stayed over it for a moment.

Not to hold it in place.

But to keep it from vanishing.

Then she turned back to the trees, to the light, to the wind that barely moved.

They'd eaten together that evening, quietly -- pike and cabbage.

A few hours had passed since she'd stepped outside with the pendant -- long enough for the light to change,

and for neither of them to speak of it again.

She'd stirred the pot. He stood nearby. They ate without rush, without talk. When they were done, the light

outside was gone, and the room had grown quiet.

She reached for him -- not with a look, not with a word. Just the certainty of someone who already knew the

answer.

They didn't talk about love that night. But in both their minds, they had long since been married. Not by law.

By how they held each other when everything else went quiet.

They had just made love.

She wore only her old cutoff shorts -- the ones she always wore high, ragged at the hem, ending halfway down

her thighs. Her bare feet made no sound on the wood.

There had never been anyone else.

"The moon's out tonight," she said with a half-smile, already stepping backward toward the door. Her eyes

stayed on him in the candlelight.

He didn't say anything. Just rose, followed, and blew out the candle as he passed.

The clearing wasn't large -- just enough space for the moon to touch her.

He sat down in the old chair by the porch. Let the cool air find his arms. Rachel stood in the center of the

clearing, still for a moment. Then the music in her moved.

She danced.

Not with sway or softness -- not like anything gentle. Her movements were clipped, exact. The kind taught by

repetition, not performance. She placed her fists on her hips, elbows wide, chin up, and began to step -- back,

then back again. Her heels hit the ground with certainty. Her knees bent and lifted with sharp control. It wasn't

wild. It wasn't slow. It was alive. It was Russian.

The moonlight followed her. It found her chest -- bare, pale as a marble sculpture in motion. Her nipples

caught the light like velvet pads, petal-pink against all that whiteness,

forward and gently drawn by weight,

shaped not by tension but by softness -- the kind only time gives. They pointed with a quiet boldness -- not

asking to be seen, but impossible to miss. As if the night itself had stepped back to let her exist.

She was free here. His gaze was there by permission -- the only one who had ever been given it.

Silas didn't say a word.

She wasn't dancing for him.

She danced because she was happy.

Because the night was clear, and the metal was cool on her skin.

Rachel hadn't looked in a mirror in years.

She had never really belonged to the village. Only endured it.

The teasing wasn't a season. It was her upbringing.

The mirror wasn't kept out in the open. It stayed where she'd left it - tucked beneath a

row of books no one had ever touched but her. Their spines were faded, some warped

from damp, mostly old novels and children's stories her great-grandparents had once

bought for her grandparents, who had passed them down to her. The mirror

lay hidden

under them, wrapped in cloth. The mirror was just a thin sheet of glass with foil

backing, cracked in a dozen places like roots. No frame. But still a mirror.

She unwrapped it and propped it against the wall, just high enough to see her chest

and face together.

Her pendant rested just below the notch where her collarbones met.

She liked the

weight - not for how it felt, but for what it meant. It was bigger than most, but not out

of place. There was something ancient in the way it looked - as if it could've been

worn thousands of years ago by someone who lived in rhythm with the land, shaped by

it, part of it. The face and the branches together meant something - a person in

balance with nature. It was the kind of thing worn by someone who had earned it.

Someone wise. Someone honorable. Someone who didn't take from the earth without

giving back. It didn't draw attention. It didn't need to. And that made it

perfect.

She pulled out the book she had once shown Silas - the one with dragons. She

tenderly, with misty eyes, flipped through it slowly. Some flew in dark forests, wings

stretched between branches. Others crept low to the earth, spine arched. One was

hiding in a cave. She wasn't looking for a favorite. Just remembering. How she used to

wish they were real.

Not as protectors, but as proof - that something that powerful could still be alone and

still survive.

Silas was her dragon.

Not something she needed saving from. Something she needed to hold onto.

A lifetime of solitude, time spent staring at the book, up until right before she met Silas,

rose up slow and full. She remembered Silas and closed the book.

It was enough to know it was there.

Enough to know the dragons had made it.

And lived.

In some way.

Even if no one ever found them.

Even if the world forgot. Even if it already had.

She smiled - not proud, not reassured. Just quiet.

Then she carefully wrapped the mirror again and slid it back between the books.

Silas had forgotten the world, and he was certain it had forgotten him. People, he believed, didn't care - not

really - not the way he did.

He'd once thought that if he left - within weeks, months, even a few years - someone else would take the

light. The world would shift its gaze without hesitation. His absence would be noticed briefly, then folded

away. Another name, another exhibit. Another noise. What passed for fame had always felt brittle to him -

bright and loud, but hollow at the center.

What he wanted had nothing to do with applause. Museums would have taken anything he offered. But that

wasn't the point. The truth - the one he never said aloud - was that he didn't want to be known while he was

alive. He wanted to become a legend the planet would never forget.

That's why he used bronze - an alloy made mostly of copper. Silas only ever used his own special alloy, with

silver to bring a quiet nobility, and germanium, which, after heat treatment, formed a protective layer - an

oxide - that made it highly corrosion resistant, almost like gold. It also hardened the metal, made it tougher,

and helped preserve the fine details. The edges stayed sharp. The work stayed whole. Still being bronze, it

still did show its life - just infinitely slower than traditional bronze.

Silas would never believe how wrong he was.

He was dearly missed - not just remembered, but mourned in silence by people he never met. Most assumed

he was dead. His disappearance only deepened the mystique. One by one, the pieces he'd given away

before vanishing began to surface - and every auction broke the last. World records fell quietly, without

spectacle. They just loved. Most people outside of the art world knew of him.

Silas was terribly wrong. He was mentally ill. He would get what he always wanted, although it happened

differently than he could have ever expected. He would never be forgotten on this planet. Ever.

Dimitri Borgatov opened the manila envelope while drinking his

coffee. Steam curled upward, slow and

unbroken. Inside were the latest photographs - part of a quiet file he had been building for months. Silas.

Rachel. The cabin. The horse. The forest.

And the castings.

There were nearly a hundred of them now - piled without ceremony in that small wooden workshop. He

studied each photo carefully, as if memorizing a map no one else could read. Every one of those pieces

could sell for millions.

He examined each photo once. Then slid them back into the envelope and kept drinking his coffee.

Silas never buried in the same place twice. The routes changed constantly.

Dimitri watched.

He added cameras as needed - slowly, methodically - covering the places Silas returned to most often. The

lake. The river. A distant stretch of treeline behind the ridge. As the network grew, so did the results. He

caught three out of every five burials. That was enough.

He didn't move fast. He didn't need to. Some sites stayed untouched for months. Others, longer. When

conditions were right, someone went in. Extracted the object.

Silas never noticed.

He would cast almost every day. Then, once a pile began to form, he would spend a few days riding out -

searching for what seemed like random places to bury them. Always unpolished.

Dimitri thought: Almost like he hoped whoever found it would finish the work themselves. He knows he can

only do so much in one life.

There were probably thousands buried before he ever found him. Scattered across years, across countries,

across entire eras of the man's life. They were gone. Unrecoverable. It didn't matter.

What mattered was now.

Dimitri kept everything. Burial depth. Type of terrain. Soil type. Access routes. GPS coordinates. And

photographs.

Each location was marked in permanent marker - circled in red so there would be no hesitation. GPS got

them close. The photos made extraction twice as fast.

Dimitri had first heard of Silas through his daughter.

She wasn't the worst child a man could have - but she was spoiled, and he knew it. That had been his fault.

He had given her everything too early, too often. The money, the handlers, the silence. She'd smile when he

gave her something she wanted - for a minute, maybe two - before it disappeared and she turned back into

herself. He lived for that smile.

She had wanted one thing more than anything else.

A piece by Silas.

That's what this had been about, at first.

Not legacy. Not money.

Just a father trying to give his daughter what she asked for.

He'd monitored Silas for many more months.

Each month, the pattern slowed. The burials came less often. More castings stacked up inside the workshop

- until they stopped altogether.

The casting itself stopped.

Dimitri liked Silas's work. It was made to survive, and that was the only thing Dimitri had ever respected.

It couldn't last forever.

Time to harvest.

Two out of every five were still slipping away, left in the woods where he couldn't reach them fast enough.

That margin was no longer acceptable.

He wanted them all.

Before any more disappeared.

He would find a jeweler - someone quiet, someone he could trust. They would finish polishing them.

And every one of them would go to his daughter.

All of it.

There was nothing left to wait for.

The silence had been long enough. The photographs were all starting to look the same. The forest. The two

of them. A routine that had stopped evolving.

He was done waiting.

They were living on borrowed time, and he was the one who'd let it run this long.

No more watching. No more photos. No more routines.

Drop them.

But something about it lingered. The photographs. The horse. The quiet. The way they looked at each other when they thought no one was watching.

Maybe, Dimitri thought, he'd let them die clean.

Side by side.

Easier to toss into a hole that way.

He didn't believe in romance. But symmetry - that, he respected.

It made him feel better.

Two suppressors. Two rounds. One second.

No warnings. No struggle. No sound.

He gave the order himself. The team was already nearby. They'd wait. However long it took. Only when Silas

and Rachel were side by side - when they were least alone - would it happen.

One moment. Then nothing.

He figured it was the cleanest ending they could have hoped for.

And the only one they were ever going to get.

He was drunk when he gave the order.

Sitting in the dark, bottle half-finished, watching the feed from the monitor.

He muttered at the screen, low and slurred.

"Oookay. Okay, now kiss. Hurry the fuck up. Okay - that's good."

He lifted a hand.

The man beside him nodded once and spoke quietly into his headset.

"Now."

Two suppressors coughed once.

Their heads snapped back almost in the same instant - the kiss still frozen between them.

No time to scream. No time to fall.

Just two empty bodies dropping like sacks into the snow, smoke rising thin from where their skulls used to be.

As the men dumped Silas's castings into huge duffel bags, working fast, Dimitri walked over to the two

bodies.

He crouched next to Rachel first, grabbed the cord around her neck, and held it tight in one hand.

With the other, he pulled a knife and cut through it in a single motion.

He held the pendant up to the fading light.

"This your favorite, huh?" Dimitri muttered. "Your masterpiece for your girlfriend."

He moved to Silas, did the same - yanked the cord tight, sliced it free. The

pendant was different, but not by

much. Still her face. Long hair gently blowing in the wind. The same face he'd just taken off her.

"Two masterpieces," Dimitri said, pocketing them both. "I have them now. Enough bullshit. Okay."

He rifled through their pockets quick and sloppy, finding nothing.

Then he straightened up, waved a hand without looking.

"Hurry the fuck up," he barked, and walked away.

The building stood above the clouds - polished glass, cedar panels, and silence that cost more than most homes. At this height, the wind didn't rattle windows. It folded itself around the structure in deference.

Takashi Kageyama arrived without noise. The door had already opened. A gloved man bowed without needing to be acknowledged, and Kageyama passed through like a reflection crossing a still surface.

He walked slowly, not out of frailty. He was a tall man in his late sixties, with a posture untouched by age - shoulders level, movements deliberate, the kind of grace that came not from youth, but from discipline held over decades.

The suit was charcoal, hand-stitched in Milan and never once remarked upon. His tie had no color. He

wore no watch. Yet time and money both arranged themselves around his presence.

Takashi Kageyama's office occupied the northern wing - a corner that faced both the rising and setting sun. It was not minimal, but it was precise. The inner walls were lined with textured handmade paper. The wood was dark, aged, and smooth to the eye, left matte rather than polished. A small alcove on the back wall housed a single seasonal flower and a bronze incense burner. The window screens were adjustable but designed with traditional latticework, crafted so finely that they never cast a harsh shadow unless the sun struck directly.

He sat at his desk, a seamless slab of rare hardwood that had taken years to cure properly. No visible cables. No laptop. Just a bound stack of printouts and a black-ink fountain pen. About eight feet away, elevated at perfect eye level on a stone plinth near the window, stood Casper.

The crown's position was intentional - close enough that he could make out every detail without squinting, far enough that it never intruded. Its presence required no explanation.

He turned the page of a market report. Then another. Hundreds of millions. Logistics routes. Rare earth elements. Pharmaceuticals. Every detail placed by hand. He read them all. He never missed a decimal.

There was a knock. Then the door opened with precise slowness.

A man entered, bowed, and approached the desk - carrying a deep indigo envelope made of layered paper, its surface soft and fibrous, hand-stamped with a single red seal - the character for quiet, written in an archaic script.

Kageyama stood to return the bow. His was shallower, but slower - the etiquette of a man who knew his status, but still honored the exchange.

The envelope was placed with care between them.

Kageyama lifted it, broke the wax seal cleanly, and removed the single item within.

A photograph.

He did not react, not at first. But he brought it closer.

The image had been posted to the social media account of Dimitri Borgatov's daughter.

It showed her facing the camera, waist-up, the pendant displayed clearly against her chest.

The shot wasn't casual. It was meant to be seen - a spoiled child's quiet way of bragging about something she was never supposed to have.

One person screenshotted it. Then it was shared. Then copied again.

Within a week, there were rumors - half-joked about, dismissed, forgotten.

No one believed it was real.

But Kageyama did.

He looked down again at the pendant - studying the face carved into it.

The wide ears, the long shape, the quietness written into every line - it wasn't a commissioned piece.

It was someone Silas had known.

Someone he had understood.

Truly unique. That kind of face didn't belong to a model or an actress.

It had belonged to someone real.

It took him only a few minutes. He had studied Silas. A man like that didn't just disappear. More likely, he had fled somewhere remote. Somewhere wild. Somewhere like Russia.

And then, eventually, someone had found him. The wrong person.

The pieces fit too cleanly: the unfamiliar face, the new design, the kind of work a man might still be making if he were alive - and hiding.

If the girl was connected to him, then it was already too late.

If not, she might be the only part of the story left unbroken.

She had the kind of big ears a child might have been mocked for.

Silas, too, had struggled with the shape of his face - lighter than others, and easy to mock. He grew up belonging nowhere.

What endures knows what endures.

He gave the photo one last look.

Endure a little longer, he thought. Someone sees you.

Then he made a series of phone calls. Quietly. One after another. No names. No titles. Just voices.

People militaries and governments could reach - but chose not to. Kageyama would reach them anyway.

Quietly. In the manner of old debts and older understandings.

It was handled with patience.

Kageyama gave no deadlines, no commands. Only silence - and in that silence, time was taken.

Days passed. Then weeks.

Under his direction, Dimitri Borgatov's home was quietly entered.

There were no alarms triggered. No broken doors.

Only the faint ripple of something larger moving just beneath the surface.

The mansion was vast, but not impregnable.

Borgatov's daughter lived there too, unwitting and shielded by layers of

casual luxury.

She was left untouched.

The search was done by hands that left no fingerprints.

Nothing was taken. Nothing broken.

Only photographs were made - the evidence recorded in quiet precision.

Inside a small upstairs room - not even locked - they found what they needed.

A shelf of documents. A drawer of photographs.

Not very well hidden.

Surveillance.

Clippings.

Printouts.

Screen captures.

The work of a man who believed himself untouchable.

Kageyama received the first batch of photographs at dawn.

He reviewed them alone, without comment.

And for the first time in a very long while, he allowed himself a moment of quiet disappointment.

Sloppiness had no place in what was coming.

The evidence was processed the way Kageyama expected - without noise, without wasted motion.

The image of Borgatov's daughter was isolated first. Out of honor, the background was removed, and

her figure erased - leaving only the pendant she had worn. What needed to be seen remained.

Nothing else.

The GPS coordinates and photographs were more than enough.

The workshop.

The horse ranch.

It was a place that appeared on no official map - a name passed by word of mouth, known only to those who already belonged to it.

Kageyama allowed himself a brief, silent respect.

Silas had not fled blindly.

He had chosen.

Chosen to vanish into a place that did not care to be seen.

He went himself.

Not to find the properties - those were already known.

Only to confirm what he already suspected:

That the people who once lived there had disappeared.

He showed the photograph - the one taken from the girl's social media post, the background carefully removed.

It was the bronze pendant - Rachel's face, fine enough to know, with the snowy-looking stone set at its center.

But it was the ears they remembered first.

Some only shook their heads.

Others spoke of silence - of people who had been gone for years.

No one had seen them leave.

No one had gone looking.

Kageyama moved on - to the tavern.

It was a half-sunken building, slumped into the earth, its roofline sagging under the weight of years.

Only a few men were inside, scattered far from each other, as the village itself was - homes thrown across the land like stones.

He asked without names - only descriptions.

A man who looked like he could have come from anywhere - strong like an ox.

A tall woman with big ears.

He kept to himself.

She was probably local.

When Kageyama asked, the men at the table laughed - half-drunk, without honor.

"Oh, you're looking for Weasel Ears," one of them said, and the others chuckled.

Kageyama bowed slightly and answered, "Yes."

"Haven't seen Weasel Ears in years," another said, and this time they laughed harder - loud, breathless, without restraint.

They had no more to offer. Only old jokes.

The kind people made when they needed to believe they were above what they didn't understand.

He listened once, and carried it with him.

Then he moved on.

The four of them had waited in the car - silent, unmoving - while he asked the questions and walked the fields alone.

It was not their place to interfere.

Not in a search like this.

Not when the weight belonged to one man alone.

They were there to protect.

To witness.

Nothing more.

They waited now, positioned at a respectful distance from the ruins of the horse ranch.

No one moved.

No one needed orders.

Kageyama stepped out alone.

The door closed behind him with a quiet, respectful weight - the kind of sound these men understood,
men who knew some work could not be shared.

He walked toward the house - Rachel's - not for evidence, but to understand.

He knew Silas - through the work, the poems, the quiet stories that survived him.

But her - he only knew her face, cast in bronze, holding something fierce and tender that no stranger could fake.

If he could understand her, even a little, the rest might follow.

And then, when the time came, he would know what had to be done.

He thought briefly of what one of the quieter villagers had said - after he left the tavern, as he made his way toward the ranch.

That the tall woman and the outsider had seemed like a pair within a year of his arrival.

No certainty.

Just village talk, said without malice.

Kageyama remembered the images - quietly taken from the photographs Dimitri had kept:

two houses, two lives, but paths worn quietly between them, a rhythm shared without needing words.

He already knew enough.

If they had vanished a few years ago, and were spoken of as a pair soon after he arrived, then their bond had lasted nearly a decade.

Separate in walls.

But not in the ways that mattered.

He moved slowly as he walked - reading the house, the ground, the way the wind moved the taller grasses.

Everyone in the village had seemed to keep a Yakutian horse - small, strong, perfect for the cold.

He did not need to see inside to know that the house had been stripped.

There would be no furniture.

No papers.

Nothing left that mattered.

The village itself did not appear on any formal map.

There was no law here.

Only memory - and memory was not always loyal.

He walked without hurry, watching the ground more carefully now.

Not with arrogance.

Not with desperation.

But with the attention a man gave to places that deserved to be remembered.

The door swung open without resistance.

Kageyama stepped inside.

They had taken everything.

No furniture.

Nothing but dust and the faint cold of an abandoned home.

Only in the bedroom did something remain.

The books were still there - kicked around lightly, scattered a little, but never truly disturbed.

This room had been passed through quickly, he thought.

There had probably been little to take to begin with.

Of course.

Books held no weight to people like this.

He moved with deliberate calm, crouching down.

One by one, he lifted them - brushing away dirt, straightening what he could.

Dozens, perhaps.

He searched through each without hurry, hands steady, reading the titles, the margins, the wear of
fingers across their edges.

Buried in a loose pile of books that looked as if they had been dumped when
a shelf was taken, he
found it: a small mirror, shattered into pieces but still held together by the
cloth that had wrapped it.

He set the mirror aside carefully, handling it as if it still lived.

He kept going.

The books told more than the walls ever could.

Some were worn from time and hands - but one stood out.

Its spine was more broken than the others, the pages softened from years of
being turned, closed,
turned again.

Every page had beautiful dragons and Russian cursive writing - the ink fine,
the shapes flowing like
water.

Even the pages themselves looked as though fingers had traced over all the images, pausing here and there, as if in thought.

The dragon book.

Of course, he thought.

He spoke aloud, voice low, fighting against the tightness in his throat:

"Fighting the blood in my veins, my face a shadow of a dragon."

He closed the book with quiet reverence.

"Dark Mirror," he said.

The series Silas had loved - the series he had written his life into.

The series is each a variation in visually representing the poem while also using a dragon each time as the poem mentions dragon and using a stone from his Dark Mirror rock.

The Dark Mirror rock Silas found deep in the woods and cut and polished himself into over a dozen cabochons.

When working it, he discovered its toughness, which made him think it might be jade.

Silas had it tested.

It was far more precious.

It was an alkaline rock with jade-like toughness and a bizarre mineral

composition, and after formation
was hydrothermally altered, combined with it having a pattern being so
strange everyone agrees it's
unique to all known rocks.

After he disappeared there had been much discussion on just how rare it was;
most agreed it was a
one in a trillion - that became a phrase that stuck. Others said one of the
rarest rocks ever found.

The kind of material only instinct could choose.

The kind of life only instinct could carry.

The broken mirror.

The dragon worn thin by careful hands.

The patience of a face, cast into bronze, that had not been made beautiful -
only made true.

He set the mirror carefully beside the book and studied them both again.

It was clear - the dragon book had been handled more than the others.

Not just read, but lived with.

She must have loved dragons since she was young.

Silas had loved them too - and she would have seen his dragons long before
understanding him.

Seen them for what they were.

Recognized the fight - because it had always been inside her as well.

She had understood his dragons - not as symbols, but as something she had carried in herself all along.

Not because she was told.

Because she had always known.

He looked around the empty room.

She had lived with almost nothing long before Silas ever found her.

He closed his eyes for a moment, steadying the weight inside him.

There was no need for proof.

No need for witnesses.

It had been written already - in blood, in spirit, in the quiet battles they had both fought long before they ever found each other.

He already knew.

He rose to his feet, the broken mirror in one hand, the book in the other.

He looked once more at the battered floor, the quiet ruin of what had been left behind.

And in the calm weight of a man who understood too well, he said:

"The only thing I needed to find was the only thing they had no use for."

The glass fragments, wrapped carefully in their old cloth, felt as if they might disintegrate in his hands.

The book was no better - the spine giving a soft sigh with every movement.

Kageyama placed them both gently in the car, laying them as one would lay offerings - not secured, not restrained, but given space to breathe.

Then he turned, and walked.

The way was already clear to him - shaped by memory, quiet study, and traces left by those who had once watched too closely.

He walked without hurry, the cold brushing his coat, the fields silent around him.

He thought of them as he moved - Silas and Rachel.

How love, once found, had become their final act of defiance.

How death, once sent for them, had simply closed its hand.

He walked with those thoughts held tightly in his chest - the kind that made no sound, the kind that needed no words.

But the words came anyway, unbidden.

He spoke them low, not to the world, but to the memory he carried:

"Memories of darkness, take my breath, squeezing, fighting, the blood in my veins, pacing, punching,

mumbling, at memories, seeded by a dragon, so long ago, a dragon's a cruel snake, magical, can't see

one until after you're bitten, twisting coils, sounds that seem like words, are sparks, leaving nothing
after they burn, burned and running, as fast as I can, into darkness and the unknown, my face a shadow, of a dragon."

Each step seemed to draw the line deeper.

The house stood not far away, watching.

It was not stripped bare the way the ranch had been.

Doors still hung from hinges.

Windows remained unbroken.

Through the glass, he could see furniture left behind - chairs, a heavy table, even small things no one had dared to touch.

The villagers had left it standing - not from reverence, but from fear.

In a place like this, no one touched what might belong to a man like Borgatov.

No one asked questions about ghosts.

No one wanted to find what might still be waiting.

It was not law that kept them away.

It was memory.

And survival.

He slowed.

No one had told him where to look.

No marker had been left.

But the ground spoke clearly.

He had expected the silence.

Expected the cold.

But not the shape the ground made.

It had broken once - dug up by hands that wanted the dead hidden but not honored - and the signs
were still there if you knew how to see them.

A loose mound of dirt, faded now, trailed along his left side, as if the earth
itself remembered where the
bodies had been dragged from, and where the hole had been hastily filled.

Even the way it sloped - uneven, reaching back toward the house - told the
story without needing
words.

Now the ground was covered in grass, thin and patchy where the earth had
never truly healed.

And beneath it, the land was sinking, slow and uneven, as it reclaimed what

had been forced into it.

It was what happened when flesh and time gave way together, and the land,
left unhealed, began to
sag into the shape of the forgotten.

He stopped there, standing over it.

And he bowed - low, and for a long time - not to death itself, but to the life
that had been denied its
ending.

The grave had been waiting.